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STUDIES

IN
THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

Jesuits and the Homeless

Companions on Life's Journey

WILLIAM E. CREED, S.J.

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THE SEMINAR ON JESUIT SPIRITUALITY

The Seminar is composed of a number of Jesuits appointed from their provinces in the United States.

It concerns itself with topics pertaining to the spiritual doctrine and practice of Jesuits, especially United States Jesuits, and communicates the results to the members of the provinces through its publication, *STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS*. This is done in the spirit of Vatican II's recommendation that religious institutes recapture the original inspiration of their founders and adapt it to the circumstances of modern times. The Seminar welcomes reactions or comments in regard to the material that it publishes.

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Richard A. Blake, S.J., is chairman of the Seminar and editor of *STUDIES*; he teaches film studies at Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Mass. (2002)

James T. Bretzke, S.J., teaches theology at the University of San Francisco, San Francisco, Cal. (2006)

Gerald T. Cobb, S.J., teaches English at Seattle University, Seattle, Wash. (2007)

Patrick J. Howell, S.J., is vice-president for Mission and Ministry at Seattle University, Seattle, Wash. (2006)

Mark S. Massa, S.J., teaches theology and is director of the American Catholic Studies Program at Fordham University, Bronx, N. Y. (2006)

Thomas Massaro, S.J., teaches moral theology at Weston Jesuit School of Theology, Cambridge, Mass. (2006)

Gerald L. McKevitt, S.J., teaches history at Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, Cal. (2005)

Philip J. Rosato, S.J., is senior fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center, Washington, D.C. (2005)

Thomas J. Scirghi, S.J., teaches liturgy at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, Berkeley, Cal. (2007)

Thomas Worcester, S.J., teaches history at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Mass. (2007)

Michael A. Zampelli, S.J., teaches theater and dance at Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, Cal. (2007)

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Business Office

Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits
3601 Lindell Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63108
Tel. 314-633-4622
Fax 314-633-4623
E-mail ijs@jesuitsources.com

Editorial Office

Faber House
102 College Road
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467-3841
Tel. 617-552-0860; Fax 617-552-0925
E-mail fleminpb@bc.edu

JESUITS AND THE HOMELESS

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William E. Creed, S.J.

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39/4 • WINTER 2007



the first word . . .

The youth skulking under the visor of his baseball hat displayed a new evolutionary mutation. He grasped his Bic in a clenched fist, thumb and three fingers wrapped around it in a stranglehold with only the pinky folded underneath, as though ready to plunge it daggerlike into the heart of the English language. This vision should not have come as a surprise. Anyone who deals with student communication knows that the current generation no longer has the benefit of the legendary brass-edged ruler applied across the back of the hand to ensure a meticulous tracing of Palmer-method swirls and flourishes. For years we've watched them pump their hands during exams, as though ten minutes of writing in a blue book causes cramps and convulsions. I've noted how many of them squeeze their writing instruments between the knuckles of the index and middle finger and guide it twitching and scraping across the page, leaving a trail of broken printed capital letters in its wake, shattered remnants of the words once consecrated by Milton and Donne. The languid loops of Palmer have been supplanted by the twitches of Parkinson's. Years ago I gave up on essay questions for the finals. They do take-home essays on their laptops and hand them in before they do a relentlessly objective exam during the prescribed time.

Yes, evolution continues. What further evidence do we need? Some generations back we lost prehensile feet (and tails) in exchange for opposable thumbs. Good trade, that. As we continue down our Darwinian trail, I predict that that thumb, the glory of our species, will grow longer, lose its nail and develop a knuckle that has rotated ninety degrees inward to accommodate text messaging and the control buttons of Atari play stations. The skull will continue to evolve as well. A few generations ago we yielded our sagittal crests and opted for rounded foreheads. This was a less fortuitous development, since it facilitated the wearing of baseball caps, day and night, indoor and out, formal or casual. Unless I'm very much mistaken, future skulls will feature a temporal void in front of the left ear and a single horizontal bony protrusion from the cheekbone to cradle cell phones. At the same time, the ear canal will expand to an inch and a half in diameter to receive multi-track ear buds from iPods. *Homo sapiens* will go the way of *Australopithecus*, and a new species will replace us: *Homo iPhoneicus prolix*.

In addition to physical development, this current spasm of evolution has its tribal consequences as well. As a creature of the-ink-and-paper gen-

eration, I'm a bit disconcerted by the social implications of this evolutionary bobsled ride through cyberspace. What could be more upsetting than seeing boy and girl wandering across campus in the romantic glow of twilight, holding adjacent hands while each exterior hand grasps a cell phone to facilitate a conversation with someone else. Whatever happened to the splendid rampage of post-adolescent hormones? Take away the romantic element. How many of us are nibbled to death by e-mails about the most inconsequential questions from students who would rather give up pizza and diet soda for a week than appear during office hours for an actual face-to-face conversation? Some researchers have actually found a pattern of students sending e-mails to their roommates while both are present in the same room. Electronic communication has supplanted human interaction. It's more comfortable. Safer.

Marshall McLuhan had it backwards. In the 1960s, when he was introducing his readers to the notion of communication, he proposed the theory that the newly wired world of media would create a "global village." Nonsense. He could not have been more deluded. We've had McLuhan's communications revolution and been tied together by film, radio, and television for decades, and more recently the Internet has been added to the mix. Yet, the world has never been more divided. Audiences do not use media to gain information but to reinforce their own preconceptions. We have all the symptoms of entertainment addiction. Anything to avoid facing the real world. With the proliferation of media, the fragmentation of cultures has accelerated. People in red states listen to Rush Limbaugh, watch Fox News, and believe that people who read the *New York Times* and tune in to National Public Radio are engaged in a vast conspiracy to force them to eat sushi and drink Chablis. And vice versa, of course. People in red states are trying to get us to kill ourselves in NASCAR races after downing a six-pack and four pounds of fried ribs.

As an antidote to McLuhan's thesis about the "global village" myth, may I suggest the proposition that effective communication occurs in inverse proportion to the available media of communication. That is, the more people withdraw into their own warm, fuzzy cocoon of selective electronic media, the less they are able to interact and communicate with others in any meaningful way. Now that everyone has access to a word processor, e-mail and a photocopier, who reads the stuff that clutters bulletin boards and mail boxes every day of the week?

With the vast number of available channels of communication, we've lost access to a common realm of experience. Once upon a time, most of us believed film and television provided the contemporary lingua franca. After a few years of trying to draw examples from current media that students could relate to, I've discovered that they do not really watch television or go to movies very often. The TV is on, but it has become an environment, not an event. It's background noise. And remember, I deal mostly with film

majors, who are supposed to be attuned to such things. These future film makers are learning the craft by posting messages for their friends on Face Book, not by watching the work of perfect strangers, who are irrelevant to their interests. Who cares about John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock anyway? Fifty years ago, Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca built their highly successful television comedy on parodies of then-current films. They could assume their television audience would be familiar with the material and get the point of the parody. No one can do that anymore. Ask how many have seen a current film or have watched a current television series, and few hands will go up.

Grumpiness about the devolution of the human race as one generation passes into another seems to come as part of the package that includes arthritis in the big toe and getting up at night. In recent years we've had "the media" to blame for evolution's downward spiral. Veteran teachers state with certainty that television addiction has all but led students to an unending quest for entertainment in classes, and the remote control has shortened their attention span to that of the fruit fly. In *Radio Days*, a Woody Allen film from 1987 and set in the 1940s, distraught parents bring their wayward ten-year-old to the rabbi for a good talking-to. They agree that his behavior problems stem from too much radio. During my juniorate days in the 1950s, a professor told us not to waste our time during Christmas vacation by reading novels. (Trash like Dickens, Thackeray, and Eliot were among the few choices made available to us.) Instead, he urged a leisurely reading of Pliny's letters in translation. Clearly, for this man, vernacular literature marked the degradation of Western culture. The pattern seems consistent. The older generation has always despaired of the younger, and the younger has always felt free to ignore its elders and go merrily along its way. This realization helps put many of our worries into perspective.

After the senescent grumpiness has been ventilated, then what? Raising arms against a sea of generational change holds as much promise as opposing evolution itself. We might just as well lament that this new fashion of teetering on two feet won't last because it clearly undercuts the stability we had on four. On chilly mornings our ancestral fur coat might be an advantage as well. After curing the rhetorical dyspepsia, I think two problems really prompt my discomfort. First, I fear a growing depersonalization of human interaction. In the Kafkaesque world that may be aborning, one could imagine the day when some university administrator will inform me by e-mail that my services will not be required next year, and that the bursar will cease making electronic salary transfers into my account. (As though I get to see my salary anyway.) Within hours, the provincial will send his own e-mail reassigning me to a parish on an uninhabited island in the Bering Sea. For a personal touch, he may note that in looking over my folder on his hard drive, he has recalled that I have this thing for walruses. (Or have begun to look like one. By that time our personnel files will be

copiously illustrated and regularly updated.) At that point *cura personalis* will have evolved into *cura electronica*. As for people of my ilk, returning to quill pens looks quite appealing, not to mention flint-tipped spears.

The second source of my discomfort stems from pride. I'm just not very good at these new styles of communication; therefore, in some zany, irrational way they have become the enemy. I don't own a cell phone and have no idea how to download songs from Napster into a device that is wired directly into my skull. I can't imagine what it would be like to try to run a power-point presentation while lecturing, showing a series of film clips, and trying to keep contact with a class. I have no interest in learning how to doctor photos from a cell phone with Photoshop or to edit film clips on Avid or Final Cut Pro. Through the years I've developed my own quite satisfactory style of lecturing from Manila folder of notes perched on a lectern. Why change? Why leave my comfort zone? Still, why are students dozing off in class more frequently than they used to? Can it be . . . ? Naw, they've been up all night with You Tube or Space Invaders. It could never be that I've fallen behind the generation gap. Blame the media. Blame the younger generation. "Rabbi, he listens to the radio all day."

In moments of brutal honesty, I have to wonder if I'm encased in my own shell of the familiar and comfortable as much as my younger colleagues insulate themselves in their own electronic bunker. Can it be we're all solipsists in our own particular way? As any parent can tell us, it's really hard to communicate across the generational void. It's even harder to admit that a gap has two sides to it. Every once in a while, a student gives me a new way of looking at subject matter I've been familiar with for years. It's a strange reaction, but although I really do appreciate the fresh insight, it's possible that a bit of resentment enters the mix. The student has seen something that I missed. This may force me to reassess my own secure, time-tested interpretations. Something new and different pushes me along an evolutionary path I'm not particularly eager to follow. I have to rethink my approach, admit a limitation in my previous position, and that's not a pleasant prospect. It's a bother. It's humbling.

Real dialogue demands a willingness to listen and realize that our own position may face some rather serious revision. Conversation differs from the usual rec-room oratory that only pours new layers of concrete over the intellectual escarpment that protects all preconceived conclusions as though they are under attack and must be defended even at the sacrifice of civility and reason. The defensive mentality comes naturally to priests and teachers, since we are more often than not cast in the role of experts dispensing truth to others. And, of course, most of the time we find support in colleagues of similar backgrounds and mind-sets. Whether the gap comes from age, geography, experience, or just a different optic on the world, one always faces a challenge in stepping out into the gap and thus

risking exposure to new ideas that may deeply change our most cherished perspectives.

In the monograph that follows, Bill Creed recounts an experience of stepping out into another world. His journey involves even more risk than intellectual panic in the face of having one's long-held ideas challenged by students on the other side of the generation gap. Bill has been conducting retreats that include homeless people, recovering addicts, and convicted felons. The mix brings a remarkable and refreshing perspective to Ignatian spirituality, as we might imagine. Most of us Jesuits in the ministry of spiritual direction understandably and even necessarily spend the bulk of our time with people who share much of our life experience and value system: priests, religious, dedicated lay ministers, parishioners, or students searching for a direction in life. At the same time, like Ignatius dealing with the prostitutes of Rome, many Jesuits do remarkable work with men and women living at the margins of the law, to be sure. Bill's contribution, I believe, brings together the worlds of spirituality and social service in a way that I found challenging and, to be honest, a bit disconcerting. I found the essay fascinating, and it may even invite a bit of healthy rethinking of some of our conventional understandings of the retreat ministry. It may even suggest an "evolution" of this oldest Jesuit ministry.

Richard A. Blake, S.J.
Editor



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Author's Prenote

Originally this essay was one of four essays by four Jesuit authors: Joe Hoover, Mike O'Grady, Bob Stephan and myself. The seminar asked me to write a monograph. I have relied on the insights of these three younger Jesuits and I have been inspired by their commitment to a faith that does justice. They have internalized the words of Matthew's Gospel: "Insofar as you did this to one of the least of these sisters and brothers of mine, you did it to Me."

William E. Creed, S.J., currently teaches courses in spiritual direction and the Spiritual Exercises at the Institute of Pastoral Studies at Loyola University Chicago. After completing degrees in law and counseling at LUC he earned his D. Min. and started several spirituality centers around the Chicago Province, some of which have been transferred to other sponsorship. Since 1999 he has been involved with the program for providing the Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life for faculty, staff and graduate students at LUC, and he serves as chaplain for the Jesuit Volunteer Corps in Chicago. His articles on spirituality have appeared in Human Development, Sacred Is the Call, Presence, a Journal of Spiritual Directors International, and National Jesuit News. He has been offering retreats to the homeless for the past ten years.

The Spiritual Exercises and the Homeless

A desire to open the Spiritual Exercises to the most marginalized of the urban poor has led to a program that involves shelters, recovery programs, and retreat houses in several American cities. Some formerly homeless people credit the experience for changing their lives and have become facilitators for others. The exchange across economic and cultural boundaries has also affected the lives of the Jesuits and their colleagues, who have embarked on a journey of self-discovery hand in hand with the retreatants.

Introduction

For ten years a few of us Jesuits have been in contact with persons who are homeless, persons who are living in transitional shelters, trying to get off drugs and alcohol, trying to get their lives together.¹

It all began with a phone call from Richard Baumann, S.J., the Chicago Provincial. "Bill, as you end your sabbatical, I'd like you to bring the Exercises in adapted form to the materially poor." Surprised by his request, but having heard a similar request from a former Jesuit, Edward Shurna, who now worked with the homeless, I asked, "Have you been

¹ Jesuits have been involved with persons who are homeless throughout our history. Ignatius of Loyola began St. Martha's House for prostitutes. Recently canonized Alberto Hurtado, S.J., established Hogar de Christo (Christ's Home) for the homeless in Chile. Horace B. McKenna, S.J., founded SOME (So Others Might Eat), and Martha's Table, soup kitchens for homeless men and women.

talking with Ed Shurna?" "No. Why?" "Well, three times during my sabbatical, Ed has said that it would be good to offer retreats to the homeless.

Would homeless retreats fulfill your request to bring the Exercises in adapted form to the materially poor?" "Of course it would." And with that phone conversation, retreats for the homeless began. Later the provincial named the venture "The Ignatian Spirituality Project." I will call it ISP.

We have learned that a mix of retreatants makes for a better retreat community. So we take men from four shelters in different regions within a city.

Soon goals for the project were established and implemented.

They were summarized by Michael O'Grady, S.J., who was the first Jesuit scholastic to join in the retreats to the homeless.

The purpose of ISP has been to provide those who are homeless an opportunity to experience the gift of some Ignatian Exercises in adapted form. This initiative has several goals in mind.

First, to conduct weekend retreats and other spiritual experiences with persons currently living in transitional homeless shelters.

Second, to form, train and involve formerly homeless persons and others—Jesuit and lay collaborators—in developing competence and confidence with Ignatian Spirituality in order to present retreats, days of reflection and spiritual companionship.

Third, to foster outreach to the homeless in other cities in the belief that everyone anywhere who is homeless has a spiritual life.

Fourth, to study the systemic issues which foster homelessness and network with those who seek to change those structures which tolerate the injustice of homelessness.²

These goals have been acted on over the last nine years. The first goal is to offer retreats. ISP offered the seventy-fifth overnight retreat in April 2007. The second goal is the formation of local teams. ISP has functioning teams in place in Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, and San Francisco, while the first year of team formation is occurring in Atlanta, Baltimore and Cincinnati. The third goal is outreach. Plans are set to reach out to two new cities in the United States for each of the next five years. During 2007 and 2008, New York and St. Louis will each host their first overnight

² Michael O'Grady, S.J., *Stories, Spiritual Exercises, and Subversions at the Margins: Homeless Men's Retreats and Homo Narrans* (Integrative Seminar, Loyola University Chicago, 2000), 4.

homeless retreat. The fourth goal is networking to end the injustice of homelessness. ISP collaborates with Coalitions for the Homeless and other organizations that advocate affordable housing, job training, and addiction prevention and recovery in the major U.S. cities. Interestingly, we have discovered that many working for social change are un-churched persons. In January 2006 a fifth goal was established when a national organization was formed. A not-for-profit corporation has been established to coordinate and implement a nation-wide collaboration to end the injustice of homelessness by bringing the gift of Ignatian spirituality to that effort.³ Several grants have been received to foster the work of this national organization.⁴ The Jesuit provincials' concern for those entrenched in poverty seems to coincide with the initiatives of the Ignatian Spirituality Project for the Homeless. Those suffering from chronic homelessness are certainly entrenched in poverty, dramatized, perhaps, as they live on the streets among the wealthiest and most prosperous people in the history of human civilization.

I. The Retreatants

Four years ago a religious woman informed ISP that she was inviting our team to the Caribbean for a retreat with the homeless. How had she heard about these retreats? "In a homily you gave in Chicago, Father." When shall we come? "Wouldn't it be good to leave Chicago winter weather behind? How about January?" ISP asked that this energetic nun line up twelve retreatants who were homeless, but I insisted that she should make sure that they had been sober for at least six weeks. Two days before the retreat, she faxed ISP, "I have ten, not twelve, and they are not the apostles." That should have been the signal that ISP was walking into foreign territory, foreign in more ways than being outside the United States. This was the only retreat where the men, one at a time, during the group sessions, left the room for ten to fifteen minutes. Wayne Richard, a team member and former cocaine addict, recognized that they

³ For further information on ISP, consult the Website: www.ignatianspiritualityproject.org

⁴ ISP has received two foundation grants in the last year and support from three Jesuit provinces. For eight years it relied on the gifts of individual donors and the donated services of Jesuits, laymen, and now laywomen. Some retreat houses have donated space or given a discounted cost for the homeless retreat.

were going outside the retreat house to the field behind and harvesting leaves from naturally growing plants. These leaves, when chewed, gave them a "high." Even while on retreat! Awareness was altered, not by grace, but by Ganja!

As the Caribbean retreat illustrated, sobriety is a necessary condition for a retreatant to have a significant experience of grace, Timothy Leary and others experimenting with drugs for a spiritual experience notwithstanding. Ignatius today might add to his fifth introductory observation in the Exercises, which dealt with generosity and openness: "Welcome only retreatants for any spiritual exercise who have indicated their magnanimous spirit by fasting from drugs and/or alcohol at least during the retreat."

ISP consults directors of transitional shelters and overnight shelters to extend the invitation to the overnight retreat to those staying at their shelters. These directors and their case counselors know who in their shelter is habitually using and who is trying to abstain. ISP relies on the recommendation of the shelter directors and case counselors. We give several criteria to shelter directors as they select retreatants from their shelter. We tell the shelter directors that the retreat works best when the retreatants have been free of alcohol and drugs for several weeks, have been on some stabilizing medication, can speak about their own story, and can listen to another's story, and have been making the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

A long-term connection exists between the Spiritual Exercises and the Twelve Steps. During a blustery winter storm in New York City in 1939, Fr. Edward Dowling, S.J., visited Bill Wilson, founder of A.A. Wilson realized that Dowling was the first clergyman to affirm the spiritual value of the Twelve Steps when he published an article in *The Queen's Work*.⁵ Within the year of that first meeting, Wilson was in St. Louis in conversation with Missouri Province Jesuits as they outlined the amazing parallels between the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola and the Twelve Steps.⁶ Wilson asked, "Who is this fellow, Ignatius?" Since then, many Jesuits have had both a personal and ministerial familiarity with the Twelve Steps.⁷

⁵ Edward Dowling, S.J., *The Queen's Work* (St. Louis, 1939).

⁶ Id., "Catholic Asceticism and the Twelve Steps," *The Queen's Work* (St. Louis, 1953).

⁷ Bill Wilson, *National Clergy Conference on Alcoholism*, 1960.

We have learned that a mix of retreatants makes for a better retreat community. So we take men from four shelters in different regions within a city. When retreatants come from multiple shelters rather than from any one residence and no one group dominates in numbers, the flow of the retreat seems more relaxed, the competitive energy seems less present. Once we led a retreat where the retreatants were from one shelter and where the shelter staff came as co-facilitators. Throughout that retreat the retreatants seemed to be acting out their authority issues with the staff. Or at least something was going on that was not life giving. Maybe there is an application here to the saying attributed to Teresa of Avila about religious: "Spread them out and they are like fertilizer where all sorts of new growth occurs, but stack them up and the stink rises to the heavens!"

ISP has learned not to have too many facilitators, whether Jesuits or lay persons. Early on, we welcomed twenty homeless African-American men and twenty suburbanite white men. The idea was to develop mentoring relationships between these two groups of men, relationships that might continue after the retreat. We learned that the homeless men held back in their sharing and were not ready to be mentored by a "white suburban dude." We drew two lessons from this. Our first lesson was to hold the total number of homeless retreatants to twelve. No, not because there were twelve apostles, but because socially a dozen can become familiar with each other, listen to one another, and relax with one another more easily than can twenty. The larger numbers seem to be a subtle block to deeper trust and sharing.

Our second lesson involved limiting those who have not been homeless to three or four, one-third or one-fourth of the total group. A ratio of three or four homeless retreatants to one of those who have not been homeless seems to assure the homeless men that they are the majority rather than the minority. This ratio seems to foster a sense of security in those who are homeless and better disposes them to trust. So the total number on retreat generally is fifteen.

One criterion in accepting Jesuits and white suburban males is their comfort with those who are of a different race, a different socio-

Almost all ISP retreats for the homeless have been for men. In the last year ISP has initiated teams of women in Chicago and Boston.

economic background, and a different religious background. They agree to communicate attitudes of acceptance and respect for those who repeatedly have failed in abstaining from drugs and alcohol. They must be able to listen to others with attentiveness, non-defensiveness, and eagerness. Another criterion in accepting Jesuits and white suburban males is their willingness to share where they are vulnerable and struggling. ISP believes that everyone struggles with some kind of compulsion, obsession, avoidance, and the like. This retreat is an appropriate place to face that and to talk about these personal challenges in a small group. In fact, Jesuits come on retreat and find themselves facing their struggles and obsessions more truthfully. One Jesuit joined A.A. after the retreat because during the retreat he realized that he was a binge drinker and needed help to change. Suburban, middle-class men come on the retreat with homeless men and discover God addressing them in and through the men who are homeless. Jeremiah, who had not made a retreat in several years, responded to ISP's invitation to join the retreat. After the retreat he commented that "my stuff isn't all that different at root from these men who are dealing with drug and alcohol addiction. My personal blocks and growing areas were challenged and addressed during the retreat in a very life-giving way. Surprisingly, I found encouragement and hope in listening to these guys who are homeless."

The pool of homeless retreatants comes from the seven hundred and fifty thousand persons who are homeless in the United States. In Chicago the Partnership to End Homelessness conducted a point-in-time count and statistical survey on the night of January 27, 2005.⁸ They counted on that one night sixty-seven hundred homeless persons in Chicago. Seventeen hundred of these were unsheltered (three hundred fifty were women, and thirteen hundred and fifty were men). Most studies indicate that the homeless do have a profile: 74 percent suffer from substance abuse; 50 percent have a mental illness; 67 percent of the homeless population in the United States is African American. More men are chronically homeless than women.

Almost all ISP retreats for the homeless have been for men. In the last year ISP has initiated teams of women in Chicago and Boston. These teams now offer overnight retreats and days of reflection for women who suffer

⁸ The Partnership to End Homelessness: Homeless Statistics, at www.peth.org/homelessness_statistics.html

from homelessness. Plans are underway in Baltimore and San Francisco to offer retreats for women who are homeless. It is important that women, rather than men, facilitate these retreats, since most homeless women have been physically and sexually abused by men.

The personalities, characteristics, and background of those who are homeless and on retreat vary. Of the thirteen men on one Cincinnati retreat, three were graduates of Xavier University, and one of these had a doctorate. Of the eleven men on our first retreat in the San Francisco area, two had dropped out of high school early to become gang members, a third had an MBA degree, and a fourth had a doctorate in science. A fifth retreatant described himself as a "functional illiterate, because I can't write." So when the group separated to write a letter to God, he asked: "Could you write my letter to God for me? I'll tell you what I want to say to God."

ISP has heard some surprising stories. Hugh sought us out to come on two retreats and one day of reflection. He walks the streets of Chicago by day. At night he sleeps at Mary and Joseph Shelter. While on retreat, he noted how a blessing in his life had become his curse. He receives a monthly check from the Veterans Administration as a former soldier. While that steady income for anyone else would be a blessing, it kept Hugh in bondage to drugs. "If I have money in my pocket for any length of time, I eventually succumb to the desire to purchase drugs." To act against this tendency to spend his monthly check on drugs, Hugh accumulates no savings. Instead, when his check arrives, he buys all sorts of things—CDs, \$1,000 suits, and the like and takes his friends out to restaurants for meals. One Jesuit noted that he was inspired by Hugh's generosity, but wished that "Hugh would find a better way of implementing Ignatius's sixteenth-introductory observation about *agere contra*." Hugh maintains that acting against his propensity to spend his money on drugs by getting rid of the money is the best way now for him. "It's the only way I've found to stay sober the way God wants. I've been sober for fourteen months. And I really do want to remain sober."

Typically, retreatants can read and write. Most come from a Baptist religious background and so know the Bible. Many have been gang members. Many have been incarcerated. Most have no income. The great majority have been trapped in bondage to alcohol and drugs since they were teens, an addiction that is often the significant factor that led them into homelessness.

II. The Retreat

The ISP retreat for the homeless was established in the belief that those who are homeless have a spiritual life. Paying attention to this spiritual life is pivotal if they are to move out of homelessness and the addictions that seem to thwart hope. The retreat offers hope and meaning through trust in God. ISP announces the retreat to shelters with these words:

A Retreat for those residing in shelters who have been sober for two months

- A time to let your experience teach you
- A time to listen to others whose lives give you hope
- A time to share something of your hopes
- A time to deepen your trust in God

The retreat has a rhythm of inviting and challenging. It fosters a growing interior awareness through sharing personally with others in pairs, in small groupings, and in the large group of fifteen. The retreat invites each person to bring his self and his history to the retreat. Almost always the depth of the experience that the retreatants have in the retreat is beyond anything they have previously experienced, even though they might have made

other “retreats,” have attended A.A. meetings and participated in group and individual counseling.

The great majority of retreatants have had their lives sabotaged by addiction. Addiction thrives on denial and deceit. The retreat focuses on freedom from addiction, compulsion, obsessions.

As we imagined a retreat with the homeless, we have done the “Ignatian thing.” We have offered to companion these persons in some spiritual exercises. However, we chose to do so in a manner different from the normal way in which the Spiritual Exercises are given. We chose to make whatever spiritual exercises these homeless men made.

And we chose to make them in the same way as they were making them. We also chose to disclose our own spiritual movements in the group as we invited these men to open and share vulnerably what they were expe-

riencing. So, although we were facilitating the retreat, all of us on retreat in effect were giving spiritual exercises to one another.

Fear was the first reality (or illusion) we encountered—fear within ourselves and fear within the men who were homeless. So we began to address this fear at the beginning of the retreat. We noted that as men we were accustomed to facing other men competitively, with our strengths. We were unaccustomed to sharing with other men our fears. With the help of George Davis, a former homeless cocaine addict and now a shelter counselor, we developed a spiritual exercise on fear. We shared two things regarding fear: a fear I've overcome and a fear I still struggle with. Facing the fear factor in our own lives as Jesuits was challenging. But sharing those fears in a group with other Jesuits and homeless men was even more difficult. We learned that all of us men, Jesuits and homeless, have many common fears: fear of speaking in groups, fear of heights, fear of the dark, fear of sickness and long suffering, fear of getting close to another person, fear of loneliness, fear of the future, fear of failure, fear of who I would be if I were really successful.

This last fear, "Who would I be if I were really successful?" hit the homeless men differently than it hit the Jesuits. The homeless men knew they were drug addicts living on the streets. One homeless man put it this way: "I know how to live with drugs as my main objective in life. I know how to live on the streets. I've done that for seventeen years. But who will I become if I am successful at getting off these drugs and off the streets?" The Jesuits faced a different fear of success. One Jesuit put it this way: "I know how to live this vowed life following Jesus, hit and miss, compromising, acknowledging that I'm only human. Who would I become if I really gave myself to God more completely than I ever have? Who would I become if I let go of half measures and somehow, in God's grace, my hit and miss ways were transformed? Maybe I'd become holy. Now that scares me."

The men who were homeless addicts were filled with a fear few Jesuits had: fear of relapse into drugs. This fear drew these homeless men to a retreat, to God, to facing the truth with thorough honesty. It is no surprise that sharing these fears openly with fourteen other men took trust. The depth of the fear that was shared increased the depth of trust. And we reflected on how fear can influence not only our own personal lives but also our social, corporate lives. H. A. Williams writes:

If you want to discover the difference which Jesus made to humanity, go to the New Testament to find out. The answer given is the casting out of people's lives of fear. Fear, in the New Testament, is considered to be the root of all evil. It is fear which makes people selfish, it is fear which makes them hate, it is fear which makes them blind, it is fear which makes them mad. Fear casts out love, just as love casts out fear. Which of the two therefore am I going to choose? ⁹

The men who were homeless addicts sat in a circle at Angela House of Prayer in Michigan City, Indiana, and came to realize how fear pro-

pelled them to the streets to avoid whatever pain they wanted to dull by the drug experience. The Jesuits acknowledged that fear kept them from approaching the African-American on the street who was begging for spare change. Here in the moment, God's Spirit was evoking deeper trust, trust in our true self below the fear, trust of one another, and trust of God. Then we went outside to pray in silence on the sandy dunes on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. With the Chicago skyline on the horizon thirty-five

miles away, the only sound was the lapping of the waves onto the beach. We allowed our fear-filled lives to be sorted and sifted. God was bigger than our fears.

For most of the homeless men, the quiet of nature was sometimes fearful. At Techny Towers Retreat Center, adjacent to an Illinois forest preserve, the quiet of the woods was threatening. Will there be bears out there in the woods? The Jesuits laughed, but our new "brothers in the Lord" did not laugh. They were serious. "Just what kind of animals are out there?" The men who live on the streets are accustomed to the streets of the city, to the rats and mice and dogs of alleys. We assured them, "No, only squirrels, birds, maybe a deer, a rare possum, and all of these will avoid you." But these men had lived alone on the streets of big cities. They had rarely, if ever, experienced the silence of nature, the peace of nature. We invited one another to welcome nature as a peaceful gift and notice the sounds and the sights. Savor. In the quiet of nature, mulling over God's encouragement in the midst of fear, they would later report:

Retreatants have lived a hell on earth. They have made choices that have caused great pain to family and friends. For many, their bodies carry the scars of bullets or knife wounds.

⁹H. A. Williams, *True Wilderness* (New York: Lippincott, 1965), 70.

"It was so peaceful. I've never had this peace. I've never felt so safe. Man, I want to stay here, like, forever!"

Hermits, anchorites, the desert fathers and mothers, and others dwell in that quiet place as a way of life. Not so Jesuits. We are urban in our roots, in our histories, and in our stories. And so with those who are homeless. The quiet of nature hopefully becomes not a place "out there" but a place "in here" where each person finds his center. It is that center which is holy ground, the place we encounter God, until God de-centers us once more through the ups and downs of life.

When the retreat is introduced in a new city, ISP generally has visited the transitional shelters in that city before the retreat to meet with staff and sometimes with prospective retreatants. In this way the staff and possible retreatants can learn firsthand who we are and something about the retreat. Once we have conducted a retreat in a city or region, the best promoters of the retreat have been those who have previously made the retreat. The directors of shelters learn from retreatants after the retreat how each one was impacted.

Recently in Chicago ISP has been welcomed into a large shelter to offer spiritual exercises on site. This is a most unusual occurrence because shelters receive federal grants and are wary of religious programs. Why this change in policy? The program director said: "We see how changed our residents are when they return from the retreat. We want to foster more of that change, more of that centered peacefulness, and more of that openness."

The spiritual exercises ISP presents have been shaped by Ignatian spirituality. And so the retreat emphasizes God's incarnational rather than transcendent presence. It attends to the concrete life and particular history of each person. Reflection on one's life experiences and God's presence to the retreatant becomes the focus. The healing of memories and the daily *examen* of awareness are presented during the retreat.

The great majority of retreatants have had their lives sabotaged by addiction. Addiction thrives on denial and deceit. The retreat focuses on freedom from addiction, compulsion, obsessions. It invites awareness of God's call to freedom to face one's true self, to be in a right relationship with others and with God. In doing so, it attends to the twofold purpose of the Spiritual Exercises, presented by Ignatius in his first introductory observation. "So is the name of spiritual exercises given to any means of

preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections and then, after their removal, of seeking and finding God's will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul."¹⁰ Retreatants are invited to face the denial of addiction/compulsion, to trust and honest transparency about their personal narrative. Retreatants are moved to claim their own life story as THE place where God is addressing them. In the very concreteness of their personal story, they are seeking God's grace, they are asking for the truth that frees as opposed to the deception that imprisons:

Mike O'Grady has written about the importance of personal narrative in the homeless retreats.

A critical element of these retreats is the ability for all persons to share their stories in a prayerful and affective environment. A key theme asked and reflected upon within the context of these retreats is this: How has God been working in our lives through the people, places and circumstances we have encountered? How can we understand the often painful and broken part of ourselves as somehow being the very place where God is inviting us into maturity and deeper relationship?¹¹

The retreat invites all present to be peers with one another by claiming, as O'Grady says,

[t]he truth of how my personal story has been undermined by forces that have overwhelmed my personal calling. This retreat invites men to be vulnerable before God and before one another by naming concretely those places where I have lied, isolated, and indulged my desires to the detriment of my own well being and the loss of relationships with family and friends and even with God (12).

Perhaps no contemporary commentator on the *Spiritual Exercises* has stressed the importance of one's personal story as has John English, S.J., in *Choose Life*.¹² He notes that the second exercise of the First Week of the *Spiritual Exercises* (*SpEx* no. 56) invites the retreatant to examine the events and persons in her life. English states, "Such prayer helps us to gain reflective knowledge and an intimate (heartfelt) understanding of

¹⁰ See, for example, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, trans. and ed. George E. Ganss, S.J. (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), no. 1. Hereafter this source will be abbreviated to *SpEx*, followed by the marginal number in parentheses of the passage cited.

¹¹ O'Grady, "Stories, Spiritual Exercise," unpublished material, 11.

¹² John English, S.J., *Choose Life* (New York: Paulist, 1978); id., *Spiritual Freedom* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1995), 262 f.

the unique way that God relates to us.”¹³ The ISP retreat fosters this intimate awareness of how close God has been to each of us.

When Ignatius writes about the Eighteenth Annotation of the *Exercises*, he says that the “Spiritual Exercises should be adapted to the disposition of the persons who desire to make them, that is, to their age, education, and ability” (*SpEx*. 18). Many aspects of the First Week of the *Exercises* in adapted form are both appropriate and beneficial in leading to greater self-awareness and deeper awareness of God. Retreatants have lived a hell on earth. They have made choices that have caused great pain to family and friends. For many, their bodies carry the scars of bullets or knife wounds. Occasionally while a retreatant is telling his story, he pulls up his shirt and shows the scars, almost to prove that it is a miracle that he is still alive. Years of alcohol abuse and drug ingestion have left damaged bodies. Often speech patterns have been affected. Nevertheless, each man has survived. God has sustained him.

As retreatants present their life stories in a small group, they receive a one-page handout. It lists evocative questions that facilitate memories of events and persons. At the end of this small-group session, retreatants are invited to look for patterns, to notice which behaviors and relationships led to good choices and which ones led to further destruction. This is the beginning of some effective discernment.

The method of initiating a topic in the retreat is witness. On each retreat, ISP invites a formerly homeless person to give witness to his life on the streets as an addict and his life now in recovery. Wayne Richard has often joined the team. He speaks with credibility and his story is gripping.

My Grandma raised me. When I was in fourth grade I learned that my Mama died when I was a baby. When I asked how she died, Grandma said: “Your mother died from a brain aneurism.” My grandfather told me that my mother died from my father hitting her.

Because of the focus on personal narrative, this retreat does not discuss ideas, attitudes, or even values about which reasonable persons can differ. The retreat invites everyone to honor the unique personal experience of each retreatant.

¹³Id., *Spiritual Freedom*, 262f.

When I was in eighth grade, Grandma died. Grandpa's new wife didn't want me around. So after staying with distant relatives for awhile, I moved in with some high school friends and their family. After graduation from a Catholic high school, I hit the streets where cocaine became a way of life—for seventeen years.¹⁴

Wayne becomes a sign of hope for the retreatants who are still homeless and still struggling. They know he understands their story. They realize that he has faced challenges similar to theirs, yet here he is, as it were, raised from the death of drugs and homelessness. Change is possible. "Maybe there is hope for me."

In Ignatian terms, this retreat focuses on the First Week of the *Spiritual Exercises*. It attends to those practices that have been self-indulgent and avoided God at the center of life. It seeks conversion from self absorption and isolation. In terms of the Twelve Steps, it attends especially to the first three steps. In step 1 alcoholics admit that they are powerless over alcohol and that their lives have become unmanageable. In step 2 they came to believe that a Power greater than themselves could restore them to sanity. And in step 3 they made a decision to turn their will and their lives over to the care of God. Attention to the un-manageability of life, to the belief that God's initiative can save someone from destructive tendencies, and to entrusting oneself into God's care are woven throughout the retreat. The witness given by Wayne and others emphasizes what God can do in our lives.

Several of the annotations of the *Spiritual Exercises* are operative during this short retreat: freedom from addictive behavior (annotation 1); focusing on that one reality that God is inviting me to face (annotation 2); giving oneself generously on retreat by giving of self to the other retreatants by speaking the truth and accepting others as they are (annotation 5); and allowing God to deal with each person uniquely rather than trying to preach or correct another retreatant (annotation 15).

The retreat adapts the First Week experiences of Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* and invites each retreatant to allow God to be the center, to surrender to God and God's way. For everyone on the retreat, no matter how close the retreatants are to God in their lives, there is some place where it is difficult to surrender. The ISP retreat process leads each person to some

¹⁴Wayne Richard, unpublished autobiography, 2002.

further opening to God in trust. But it does so, not through preaching, but by sharing our stories. We are opened to God's Spirit in listening to one another's stories and struggles. And then, after listening, we have time to pray in quiet, sometimes through a guided prayer of the imagination, sometimes through a ritual of healing of memories.

The team teases whoever happens to be the team leader: "Do we have to meet for another team-discernment process?" In fact, during the retreat the team meets three to five times together to "discern" how these particular homeless retreatants seem to be doing. The team discerns how the group is forming into a community, whether any particular individual seems to be struggling, and, especially for a Sunday, "what spiritual exercises might be best for this particular group as we all prepare to leave retreat." At the end of the retreat, a team discernment focuses on whether anyone of the retreatants might be ready to be invited back to give a witness.

Because of the focus on personal narrative, this retreat does not discuss ideas, attitudes, or even values about which reasonable persons can differ. The retreat invites everyone to honor the unique personal experience of each retreatant. It does so in the belief that God is dealing interiorly with each retreatant and each retreatant is responding to God uniquely. In summary, the retreat invites facing fears and leaning into God in trust, acceptance of my story and prayer to surrender my "inordinate attachments" to God, noticing moments of closeness to God, a healing of memories, formulating a letter to God, trusting God in this moment, performing an *examen* of awareness to review the retreat experience, and looking toward the future with hope.

Several retreatants have written about their experience. Art made the retreat recently and then wrote ISP about his retreat experience as one of peace but more significantly about the shift in his attitude toward himself. He can now appreciate that he has dignity and respect and is a good person.

Some "me" time! That's what I said about the retreat I attended the weekend of 2/17–2/18. It was very refreshing and had the most peaceful atmosphere. I learned who I am, and what I can

Whenever a Jesuit preaches or directs the Exercises, he realizes that he will be receiving grace just as the retreatants will. On the retreat with those who are homeless, this is more explicit.

do when a little patience, love, and most of all faith is applied. There were seventeen strangers that attended, in about 45 minutes of introducing ourselves and sharing truths, but most of all being honest with each other. It was like we knew each other for years. The most amazing part was how the presence of God had entered our hearts. I thought how good it would be to stay longer, but instead I returned home with those pleasant feelings and blessed thoughts, I pray they will last until I can return. I'm looking forward to another journey into my self. You know! I'm not such a bad person, really I'm not.

Steve made the retreat some time ago and wrote eloquently about his life on the streets and how the retreat impacted him. He first told his story on retreat. In the telling he experienced integrity and a felt sense of being loved.

I first told my full story on a retreat with homeless addicts sponsored by the Society of Jesus. A "normal" upbringing with family and friends, no matter how dysfunctional, does little to prepare one for life on the streets. But human beings are incredibly adaptive creatures. I learned quickly to scam money and steal food, to see strangers as marks. On the streets, life contracts to the immediate: Where is the next hit, the next drink, the next meal? Where will I sleep? Where can I piss? Giving up on society, my days became an endless search for isolation. But there is none. No privacy, no peace, no love, no life. I slept wherever I found shelter, or wherever I fell when I gave up on finding it. I awoke to the sounds of traffic and the sight of feet rushing past my face, and all I could do is sit and stare and wish to disappear. This is the real Skid Row. This is Hell. This is where you hate yourself and fear the world and those you considered friends, where you don't even have the strength to try to hide your stink and dirt and there's nothing to do but beg for booze and wonder when you'll die.

Though I lived in a halfway house at the time, the Jesuit leader invited me to come along. Once there, he asked me to tell my story. I believed I had nothing to offer. My guilt and shame strove to silence me. My fear choked me. I was the only white man there. I lived in a recovery home that would seem like a mansion to the other men. Material comfort had returned to me quickly. I had a good job. They would resent me. But I trusted the priest. Kneeling in the chapel, I prayed, "Please let me see that my entire life has been preparation for this moment." Then I told my story. "My name is Steve, and I am a drug addict."

As I spoke, I felt the truth of that phrase and the power of community for the first time. My experience began to make sense. For the first time, I felt at home. Circled by 13 homeless African American men in a suburban Chicago retreat center, I began to recognize the source of the spiritual homelessness

that led me to the streets—the distance from my brothers and God that fuels my fear. For the first time, I felt whole. I felt good. I felt that I could help, that there was a plan. Far from resenting me, the men embraced me. They called me brother. “Don’t worry, man,” one said. “You’re one of us.” And for the first time, I felt it. Later, others told their stories, and I saw their faces soften as we laid down our street-smarts and listened and trusted. And a voice in my heart said, God’s love is here.¹⁵

This telling of one’s story does center one in the reality of one’s personal life, in the events of one’s personal “scripture,” where there are choices for life in God and choices for death unto death. Being received as one tells one’s story brings about a new level of connection with one another and with one’s deep self. Hearing the truth of each other’s stories creates a bond with one another, but especially with one’s self and with God. In that connection it is not uncommon for retreatants to echo Steve’s words: “a voice in my heart said: “God’s love is here.” The retreat seems to touch not only those who are homeless but Jesuits, as well, laity, everyone involved. One Jesuit wrote as follows after the retreat:

It was late Saturday night when I went into chapel and said to the Lord in prayer: “What is going on? I feel as if down deep in my center I have been opened up to You, God. And I want to say “Yes” to You as I have never before said Yes, even though I have been a vowed Jesuit for years.” I walked out of chapel and asked. “What is going on here?” of a team member who had been homeless and on drugs. He said that “these men have been homeless and addicted to alcohol and drugs. They have lost their jobs, their families and their self-respect. Now they are trying to turn their lives around, have come on retreat and are being ruthlessly honest about themselves and their true needs. They are attempting to put aside a lifestyle of isolation, lies, individualism and addiction and entrust themselves to God. God is their last hope. Most are here because they do not want to die homeless, and you are witnessing all of this.” In that first retreat with those who have been homeless, it became clear that these men who have been homeless were evangelizing me.

These testimonies are similar to those Jesuits have received or given since the early days of Ignatius. Lives are changed when people begin to make some spiritual exercises, even the lives of those who are homeless.

¹⁵Steve Diogo, “Homecoming,” *America Magazine*, December 2, 2000.

III. Making the Journey Together

For Jesuits, when the Spiritual Exercises in any form are presented, normally we differentiate between “the one making the Exercises” and “the one receiving the Exercises.” In the ISP model, everyone makes the retreat, everyone shares openly and honestly, every participant is attentive to the movement of God’s Spirit. Whenever a Jesuit preaches or directs the Exercises, he realizes that he will be receiving grace just as the retreatants will. On the retreat with those who are homeless, this is more explicit. As a Jesuit or suburban white male facilitates the large or small group, he does so with the expectation that, along with men who are homeless, he too will be making the retreat, will be asked to share, will be “with” the retreatants as peers in some full measure.

The truth is that it is easy for Jesuits not to know in a personal way someone who is poor. The way our society is structured keeps most of us away from the very poor, other than the occasional beggar on the streets. ISP is learning that during our earthly existence bridges can be built between those who are rich in so many ways and the homeless poor who are surprisingly rich in many other ways. The overnight retreat, and more recently, the days of reflection, have become one small bridge. This little project echoes what contemporary Jesuits wrote when we spelled out our worldwide mission in 1995. We said:

[Jesuits’] ministry is particularly directed towards those who have not heard the Gospel, those who are at the margins of the Church or of society, those who have been denied their dignity, those who are voiceless and powerless, those weak in faith or alienated from it, those whose needs are greater than they can bear.¹⁶

Those who are homeless meet almost all of those criteria: at the margins, denied dignity, voiceless, alienated from God. The homeless are part of a social class that is entrenched in poverty, often chronic poverty.

Something entirely new seems to occur when homeless men and Jesuits share their human stories as peers in a personal way. Perspectives

¹⁶ “Ministerial Priesthood and Jesuit Identity,” in *Documents of the Thirty-Fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995), 87, marginal no. 169 (tabulation added).

change at several levels. Socially, the homeless are no longer perceived by the white, middle-class males fearfully, but as human beings, wonderful human beings. Similarly, Baptist African-Americans learn that the anti-Christ is not embodied in these white Catholic clerics and seminarians who call themselves Jesuits. Theologically, the white, middle-class males find themselves moved in their core by the witness of these men who happened to be struggling with homelessness and addiction. It is as if these homeless men become God's messengers. Everyone on retreat tastes God's love present in the mutual trust and transparent communication that occurs. The personal stories and the grace of telling one's story and being received in the telling gives everyone the knowledge that, as Steve said, "God's love is here."

ISP has learned that this relationship can be carried into the everyday life. One way, among several, is through one's personal daily examen. ISP developed an Examen of Awareness (or Consciousness Examen) to be made in one's imagination with a poor friend. "Rummage backward through the day accompanied by someone you know who is poor." As Jesuits began to practice this examen, they were surprised. They were not challenged to live a simpler lifestyle or to live their vow of poverty more authentically. What they did experience, almost to a man, was a change in perspective. As they reviewed their day, bringing along their poor friend in their imagination, they discovered that this poor friend was gentler, more affirming, more accepting of the Jesuit than he was of himself. The new relationships formed during the retreat do constitute something new: a new perspective regarding one another, but especially a new perspective toward oneself. "I am not who I thought I was. I am far more gifted and have taken my gifts for granted." Or, "I am not a bad person even though I have done some terrible things."

Jesuits are contemplatives in action who are centered on doing God's will with an emphasis on the "doing." They are not monks who focus on the contemplative aspect of life within the monastery, but are companions of Jesus on a mission, contemplatives in action. And the setting for ministry is usually in some urban area. Jesuits are teachers of students, inevitably learning as they teach. Jesuits are preachers of the Word, hearing and challenged by that Word as they preach it. What is striking about this new way of "being with" those who are homeless is that everyone is invited to speak as a peer. The accomplishments and successes and expertise of Jesuits and suburban whites are not formally presented dur-

ing the retreat. Rather, the retreat invites a man to focus on his particular personal struggle which is shared as each homeless person talks about his struggle with drugs or alcohol. All involved in the retreat share with personal examples, personal stories.

Joseph Hoover, S.J., writes about his personal experience of the “being with” aspect of the retreat with men who are homeless.

The first step in all the talk of deep Ignatian transformation is very simple: to be with. This is what homeless retreats are, fundamentally: a “being with.” Be with the people who are suffering, as the first response. Be with. And allow them to be with our own suffering.

Even as I read what I’ve just written, I think to myself: Don’t we have documents that tell us to be with the poor? Haven’t we said this again and again? I still need reminders. To be with. To just show up, where people are. . . . I need to be reminded. In the New Testament, James, John and Peter swore they would never leave the side of Christ. And they didn’t. Until they did. “We are Jesuits

and we have Decree Four and we will never leave Christ in the poor,” until we do, and we do again and again. Anyway, this Jesuit does, again and again. I need to be reminded: Be with. Be with. Be with. Homeless retreats, very simply are a way to be with.¹⁷

Here Jesuits and others face their weakness in trust of God and in trust of one another. Each speaks about this weakness.

Robert Stephan, S.J., the National Coordinator of ISP from 2005 to 2007, refers to this “being with” as accompaniment.¹⁸ The ISP retreats and ministry reflect an approach of “being with,” or accompaniment. Gina O’Connell Higgins studied survivors of a cruel past over a twenty-year period.¹⁹ She noted that these survivors flourished, whereas their siblings did not. After closer study, she discovered that the survivors of serious deprivation had someone in their lives, a relative or neighbor or teacher who affirmed them, believed in them, and listened to them. Accompaniment, affirmation, and a listening presence, seem to make a significant difference in the men who have not relapsed into addiction and homelessness.

¹⁷ Joseph Hoover, S.J., “The Phenomenology of Homeless Retreats” (unpublished MS), 6.

¹⁸ It was Stephan’s idea to invite Jesuits to write about their experience with the homeless.

¹⁹ Gina O’Connell Higgins, *Resilient Adults: Overcoming a Cruel Past* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.)

Stephan, in his reflections on accompaniment, notes that in a recent article for *STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS*, Kevin O'Brien, S.J., described how this approach reflects the work that is done by the Jesuit Refugee Service.²⁰ O'Brien quotes the comments of Peter Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., in his description of accompaniment in the Jesuit Refugee Service. "In so far as possible, we want to feel what they have felt, suffer as they have," such that we "see the world through their eyes."²¹ Theologian Roberto Goizueta has also developed similar ideas in his book *Caminemos con Jesús*.²² This "theology of accompaniment" is based on the idea of not only being with others as a passive observer, but in walking with one another. "To accompany another person is to walk with him or her. It is, above all, by walking with others that we relate to them and love them" (206).

Stephan notes that instead of focusing on the importance of the role of the one doing the ministry for the needy, the ISP retreats for the homeless place everyone involved in the retreat on a level ground. The ISP retreat invites each person, those who are homeless and those who are white middle-class and successful in their vocation as Jesuits or as married men, to openness to God's gift of transformation in and through this new relationship. It is the experience of accompaniment which awakens the awareness that "I have more in common with this homeless person than I ever thought." It often shakes the Jesuit or middle-class married man to recognize how much he has taken for granted the many gifts he has received, gifts freely given. Not only are those addicted to alcohol and drugs sobered from their addiction to substance, the Jesuits and colleagues who make the homeless retreat are also sobered by the truth "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

Toward the end of each retreat, everyone is invited during a concluding ritual to name the gift received on retreat. One Jesuit said, "For me this retreat has been about radical honesty." He accurately named something at the center of the retreat experience. The retreat does focus on being honest with a courageous transparency that frees us when light is brought into the darkness of denial. Addiction and most disordered

²⁰ Robert Stephan, S.J., "Transforming Culture: A Model" (unpublished ms), citing *STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2005).

²¹ Kevin O'Brien, S.J. "Consolation in Action," 30; see Peter Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., *ActRSJ* 20:318, 316.

²² Roberto Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (New York: Orbis, 1995), 206.

tendencies mushroom in the darkness. The light of truthfulness exposes the secret.

Those familiar with the *Exercises* remember the first set of Rules for Discernment that Ignatius presents. He uses three images or metaphors to describe how the “enemy of human nature” operates. The second of these three metaphors is that of a false lover. “When the enemy of human nature brings his wiles and persuasions, he wants and desires that they be received and kept in secret” (*SpEx* 326). Secrets do seem to gain power when they are hidden. One actual grace older Catholics became accustomed to was addressing in the sacrament of penance shameful secrets that were sins. The secret lost much of its power in the telling. It is not uncommon for retreatants to acknowledge that during a retreat they were able to talk about something in a way that felt safe, something they had never spoken of before. One retreatant, Ernie, wrote his reflections after a guided meditation on “the hidden treasure” of Matthew 13:44.

I found the word “truth” in a tin box buried on the beach. When I am dishonest and not truthful, I am comparable to a used car salesman selling a car which he claims is durable and dependable but lies to the purchaser. The truth is that it is just fancy framework with an engine that has not been cared for properly. This car will not function well unless the inner working of the car is examined. During that examination by one who cares for the car and its engine, questions must be asked. “Are you willing to have your car examined by the one who knows cars?” Am I willing to look at myself honestly?

Once the lie is uncovered, the reality that had been buried can now be healed. Jesuits have spoken something of their own struggle while on retreat—usually something only their spiritual director or closest friend might have heard from them.

We all run the danger of living false lives or at least living parts of our lives falsely. We use the expectations of others as our norm for behavior. Many of the men who are homeless developed their drug habit as gang members concerned about impressing their fellow gang members. By focusing on the truth, we crack open the wall of denial and admit the possibility of a life more authentic and far more free.

The retreat focuses, not on strengths, but on struggles. This approach could be negative, depressing, self-defeating, and ultimately a block to God’s grace. However, that is not the experience of retreatants during the retreat. This “being with” one another is less in our giftedness and accomplishments, but more in our failures, in our running away, in

our vulnerability. As I listen to the stories of the retreatants, my own story comes alive. Here Hoover names the awakening in his life.

I confront my own sins, at times my own lack of care. You, homeless, are here with me, and I notice that I'm not really into your sad story. I'm holding back. In these moments, my sin can rise before me. I get a glimpse of who I am, who we are, and what I and we are about. This needs to happen before I'm ready for healing.

As men who've done the exercises, dealing with men who are often in a twelve step program, or coming out of years of prison time spent contemplating their own sinfulness, we are both able to help each other "reach a deeper interior understanding of the reality and malice of our own sins."²³

While we are on retreat, we live solidarity—in and though our own humanity. We all struggle with disordered tendencies, and Ignatius reminds us that all spiritual exercising addresses our struggle and invites us to freedom to do God's will. Our solidarity is in our common struggle.

Ian Mitchell, S.J., who has been involved with the ISP retreats for two years, has noted that what Paul says about his own weakness is true for all on retreat. God's power is best made manifest in weakness (2 Cor. 12:8). But it is weakness claimed, not denied. It is weakness shared with others rather than hidden in secret. It is weakness, not indulged in, but brought with hope to the One who alone is holy. Mitchell notes that the foundation for the grace amid vulnerability dwells in the act of surrender to a God who is unconditionally trustworthy. "As Jesus' shows us by his example, living life with this kind of trust does not guarantee that one will remain safe and secure at all times. The meaning of one's vulnerability, however, is radically changed from the appearance of a fool's naiveté to the joyful abandon of one aflame with love."²⁴ He cites Jean-Louis Chrétien about the power latent in weakness. "Weakness has a certain force because it turns itself into a resource. One can only defend oneself better by exposing oneself more thoroughly."²⁵

ISP thought that its efforts could remain "just spiritual." It is surprising that a little retreat has led to involvement in social change.

²³ Hoover, *Phenomenology of Homeless Retreats*, 7.

²⁴ Ian Mitchell, S.J., "Holy Insecurity, Spiritual Abandon, and the Role of Hope in the Midst of Darkness" (unpublished essay), 11.

²⁵ Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response* (New York: Fordham, 2004), 101.

Jesuits know the Two Standards of the *Spiritual Exercises* and realize that when we clothe ourselves in riches, honors, and pride, we are not dressed for mission in Christ. Jesuits know that the way and the values of Christ involve transparent vulnerability. The experience of the ISP retreats offers a concrete instance of this transparent vulnerability. Here Jesuits and others face their weakness in trust of God and in trust of one another. Each speaks about this weakness. For many it is the vulnerability to alcohol, for some it is an exaggerated concern about what others think, for others it is anger or lying (yes, this includes Jesuits), for almost all it is wrestling with sexuality and chaste living. All involved in the ISP retreat taste the truth of Paul's words: "So I shall be very happy to make my weaknesses my special boast so that the power of Christ may be made manifest in me" (2 Cor. 12:9).

From transparent vulnerability flows humility. Another gift that the ISP retreats offer is the possible transformation through humility, Jesuits included. Jesuits and humility? Blaise Pascal and John Adams would be incredulous! So how is the reality of humility operative in the retreats with the homeless?

It is humbling for the homeless men to tell their stories about wrestling with addiction. The competitive edge of retreatants is quelled when the focus is on our struggles. The retreat is particularly humbling for Jesuits. It pushes Jesuits beyond titles, academic degrees, accomplishments, and so forth to face their struggles with others openly. All of this invites honest self-surrender to God in trust.

Stephan quotes theologian Roberto Goizueta, who cautions anyone who works with the poor. "Without . . . humility, one will—with the best intentions—once again turn the poor into mere instruments of one's own projected designs and ambitions."²⁶ The poor can become instruments of those who want to do good. The poor can be used. ISP has sought to be free from using the homeless as instruments for Jesuits particularly and hopes this very essay is not yet another "using" of the homeless poor for our Jesuit purposes.

It is not only the competitive juices that humility calms. Something happens to the American ideal of hard work, ingenuity, independence and self-sufficiency when Jesuits hear from retreatants how long some of

²⁶ Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús*, 209.

them have coped with addictions and homelessness. In our culture, the desire for transformation can become achievement by our efforts only. Stephan notes that we can easily lose perspective on what God is doing. The language of the Jesuits' Thirty-fourth General Congregation captures not only the need for transformation, but also the need to take seriously the gap that exists between our efforts and God's efforts.²⁷

This dynamic of a "humble transformation," as Stephan calls it, is an on-going process. Those who are homeless have a good experience of the retreat. But how many are permanently transformed? How many overcome their addiction to drugs or alcohol permanently? How many find a home, a job, and enter into stable and loving relationships? ISP has learned that, in some instances, life changes have occurred. But certainly that is not so with every retreatant. Rather, the retreat and follow-up are part of a much longer and larger process of transformation. Spiritual direction conversations and days of reflection will help continue this on-going process. ISP has set up opportunities for follow-up to the retreats in Boston, Chicago, and Cleveland through days of reflection and spiritual direction. It is humbling to realize that when the retreat ends maybe one or two of these retreatants will live a life that is transformed—maybe.

Not all Jesuits are called to be with homeless persons on retreats. But all Jesuits are called to allow the poor to be in our awareness when we Jesuits preach in the pulpits of suburbia, teach in classrooms, and do research. Because of this solidarity, we bring the entrenched poor with us wherever we are on mission.

Conclusion

When the Chicago provincial began the Ignatian Spirituality Project with its focus on those who were homeless, there was a call to give retreats but little sense of a call to community. We had read these words in our Jesuit documents, but in the beginning they were not consciously remembered.

²⁷ Stephan, "Transforming Culture," 9.

We must create communities of solidarity in seeking justice. . . . Every Jesuit in his ministry can and should promote justice in one or more of the following ways: (a) direct service and accompaniment of the poor, (b) developing awareness of the demands of justice joined to the social responsibility to achieve it, (c) participating in the social mobilization for the creation of a more just social order.²⁸

We thought solidarity was through the ISP retreat. This was to be a project offering an occasional retreat to some folks who were trying to get off the streets and off alcohol and drugs, people trying to live their lives more fully. Bring them in for retreat and send them off after retreat. That was the plan. But over time, it has become clearer that the plan to offer an occasional weekend retreat has been the beginning of something larger. Several "calls" have been experienced by ISP, all calls to enter into greater solidarity.

At times the solidarity is real.

The voice-mail message said: "Hi, it's me, Maxwell, and I'm incarcerated again because of my cocaine habit. I was caught again stealing to supply my habit. Since I've been jailed, I've been meditating with the Scripture and I've been journaling. I'm trying to stop the lies, go down the stairwell of my soul, and surrender to God—again. The prison is not too far from where you live. Could you come visit me? I've put you on my visitors list!"

These voice mails do not occur weekly or even monthly, but through the ISP retreat, a relationship with persons who are homeless is established. And the relationship sometimes continues long after the retreat. It can be frustrating at times to be with someone like Maxwell, who is incarcerated again. Here Pedro Arrupe's words about not ingesting our culture's "contempt for the poor" are a good challenge.²⁹ When the challenge is heard, it then becomes possible to love the goodness of Maxwell and to be a faithful friend. His voice-mail message affirms that some kind of mutual bond exists.

Over time, in each of the cities where ISP offers retreats, relationships have been formed with shelter directors, program managers, and

²⁸ "Our Mission and Justice," *Documents of the Thirty-fourth General Congregation*, 46, no. 19.

²⁹ Pedro Arrupe, S.J., "The Social Commitment of the Society of Jesus," *Justice with Faith Today* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1980), 53

case counselors. ISP has led two retreats for those who work with the homeless—people involved in helping the homeless find jobs, become involved in AA, and procure affordable housing. A key issue in each of those retreats was, What sustains you as you serve those who are homeless? The common response was: hope. These directors and case workers did not know Ignatius's Rules for Discernment. They did not realize that it was God's Spirit in them, giving them hope in the face of almost insurmountable odds.

Those who advocate for affordable housing and job training have asked ISP to join them in support of changing the way the system deals with the homeless. Until recently children who were homeless could not attend public schools in Illinois. ISP joined advocates for the homeless to change that law so that children in transitional shelters can now attend school. In the spring of 2007, ISP joined many homeless persons in Springfield to lobby Illinois elected officials for more affordable housing. Bob Stephan noted that it was like a reunion from the retreats. "I saw many men who had been on a retreat. And now here we were, on a common project—new legislation for housing."

The Thirty-fourth General Congregation said that Jesuit "commitment to social justice and ongoing human development must focus on transforming the cultural values which sustain an unjust and oppressive social order."³⁰ ISP thought that its efforts could remain "just spiritual." It is surprising that a little retreat has led to involvement in social change. ISP is still in the process of learning how to respond to this call to be advocates along with others to end the injustice of homelessness.

A community has formed comprising ISP and those who were homeless and now are involved in the retreats. Wayne, Lori, Felicia, and David now support one another in Chicago in their recovery and in their witness on the retreats for those who are homeless. Wayne is beginning to form a community of those in recovery and involved in the retreats across the various cities where ISP functions.

A national formation process is being born. Formerly homeless persons like Wayne Richard have taken further steps. Wayne says to those who are still homeless:

³⁰ "Our Mission and Culture," *Documents of the Thirty-fourth General Congregation*, 64, no. 28.3.

About a year after I became sober, I realized that I had been hoping to return to the place where I had an apartment, a job, a car and a woman. I was at that very place where I had once been and things had gone awry. I realized that I had to look deeper. I had to find out who I was, and what God's purpose in my life was so that I did not repeat my addiction and homelessness."

Wayne entered into a "spiritual conversation" relationship and then a "spiritual direction" relationship. Eventually he made the Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life over nine months, meeting with his Jesuit director weekly and sharing prayer and faith in a small group with others making the Exercises. Last year he asked to enter into the eight-month Internship in Spiritual Direction in the Ignatian Tradition, "because people in recovery from homelessness and addiction are asking me to be their spiritual director and I am not trained."

ISP realizes that the real ministers to those who are homeless are the formerly homeless—people like Wayne, Lori, Felicia, and David. They continue to ask the Jesuits for formation. The Thirty-fourth General Congregation wrote about formation of the laity. "We need to respond to their desire for formation so that they are able to minister as fully as possible according to their call and gifts. . . . We should not hesitate to offer, when requested, the experience of the Spiritual Exercises and our spiritual direction."³¹ Did the authors of that document envision that the "laity" would include formerly homeless addicts? That is what is happening, beyond our expectations.

When the Jesuit provincials of the United States issued their "Meditation on Our Response to the Call of Christ," the perspective of ISP shifted. They wrote as follows:

How can we ignore the fact that those most in need of our solidarity are those who suffer painful hardships? Perhaps the most pressing and painful examples are forced migrants, inner city populations—racial minorities, the elderly, the homeless. [26]

In the light of the vision articulated in the parable of the Last Judgment and the Two Standards of the *Spiritual Exercises*, we need no persuading that "a preferential but not exclusive love for the poor" is more than something optional; we have an urgent duty to bring the Gospel to the entire contemporary world. This commitment may be offensive to some, but as Jesuits, we make choices that flow from our commitment to choose poverty, dishonor, and humble service of the least among us, even if it must be in the face of culture promoting self-indul-

³¹ "Cooperation with the Laity on Mission," *Documents of the Thirty-Fourth General Congregation*, 162, no. 8.

gent economics, political domination, and lifestyle enclaves. . . . Our solidarity is not just for the poor. . . . This solidarity is for the sake of us all.³²

Not all Jesuits are called to be with homeless persons on retreats. But all Jesuits are called to allow the poor to be in our awareness when we Jesuits preach in the pulpits of suburbia, teach in classrooms, and do research. Because of this solidarity, we bring the entrenched poor with us wherever we are on mission.

These recent documents have called ISP to a shift in perspective. The Church and the Society of Jesus seek to become allies with those who are entrenched in poverty.

Many Jesuit universities and high schools have heeded the words of Father General to be open to experience “personal involvement with innocent suffering, with the injustice others suffer.”³³ Service learning projects have been established where students and faculty have contact with the homeless. Many Jesuit parishes have projects that link parishioners with the homeless. An opportunity seems to have ripened for a nation-wide collaboration among Jesuit universities, high schools, parishes, and retreat houses on behalf of the homeless. Such teamwork across the U.S. might make individual efforts more effective in ending the injustice of homelessness.

A set of new relationships is forming through this tiny outreach to those who are homeless. We Jesuits have had our perspective shift as we have come to know those who are homeless. We have come to call many who are homeless our friends. Their lives have cast a light of gratitude on our lives and ministry, filled with so many gifts we’ve taken for granted. Their struggles have cast a light on our vulnerabilities and struggles. Their hopes have invited us to entrust ourselves in self-surrender to the One who is Love, Truth, Justice, and Mercy. Their desire to come home, in all the physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of coming home, continues to touch our desire to come home to a faith that does justice.

We are in a community we don’t really remember joining. How did this ever happen? And in the spirit of Abraham, our father in faith, who set out trusting God without knowing exactly where he was going, we ask the question, “Where is this community leading us?”

³² US Jesuit Provincials, “*A Meditation on Our Response to the Call of Christ*” (Washington, D.C.: Jesuit Conference, 2006), 28, 31.

³³ Peter Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., “The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education,” public lecture delivered at Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, Cal., October 2000.

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